

# ABU DHABI ON THE MOVE

Whether in the desert chatting with Pashtun falconers or sipping 24-carat gold-laced coffee with Emiratis in a palace, it is the spirit of hospitality that indelibly makes its mark on Dan Avila during his visit to this land of extremes.

Recently spent a week exploring the cultural marvel that is Abu Dhabi and 'extremes' is no embellishment. The opulence, the climate, the culture... There is nothing pedestrian or bland about Abu Dhabi.

"Extending hospitality to a stranger is an honour to Abu Dhabi people, integral to Arabian culture," explains Laurence Klett, our host at Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort by Anantara.

Driving deep into the world's largest sand desert after arriving at night, there is a crimson hue as the sun prepares to rise and we see what looks to be an enormous sand storm directly in front of us. As our vehicle pushes through, visibility reduces to metres and heavy condensation forms around the car. This is not a sand storm, but a dense desert fog, common here in the winter months.



After driving through the fog for two hours, it suddenly lifts to reveal the perfectly formed dunes washed pink by the sunrise and, like a mythical Arabian palace, Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort.

**Soaring with birds of prey**

These days in the desert are our time to experience some of the traditions of the Emirates. Before dawn, we drive out through the dunes to see falcons in training. We are served tea as we sit on carpets, still amazed at the beauty of the desert in the cool of the morning.

With the falcon on his forearm, the handler removes its hood, sending it off into the sky. A lure is swung around encouraging the falcon to engage. Suddenly, the bird skims past us at over 250 kilometres per hour, swooping for a strike.

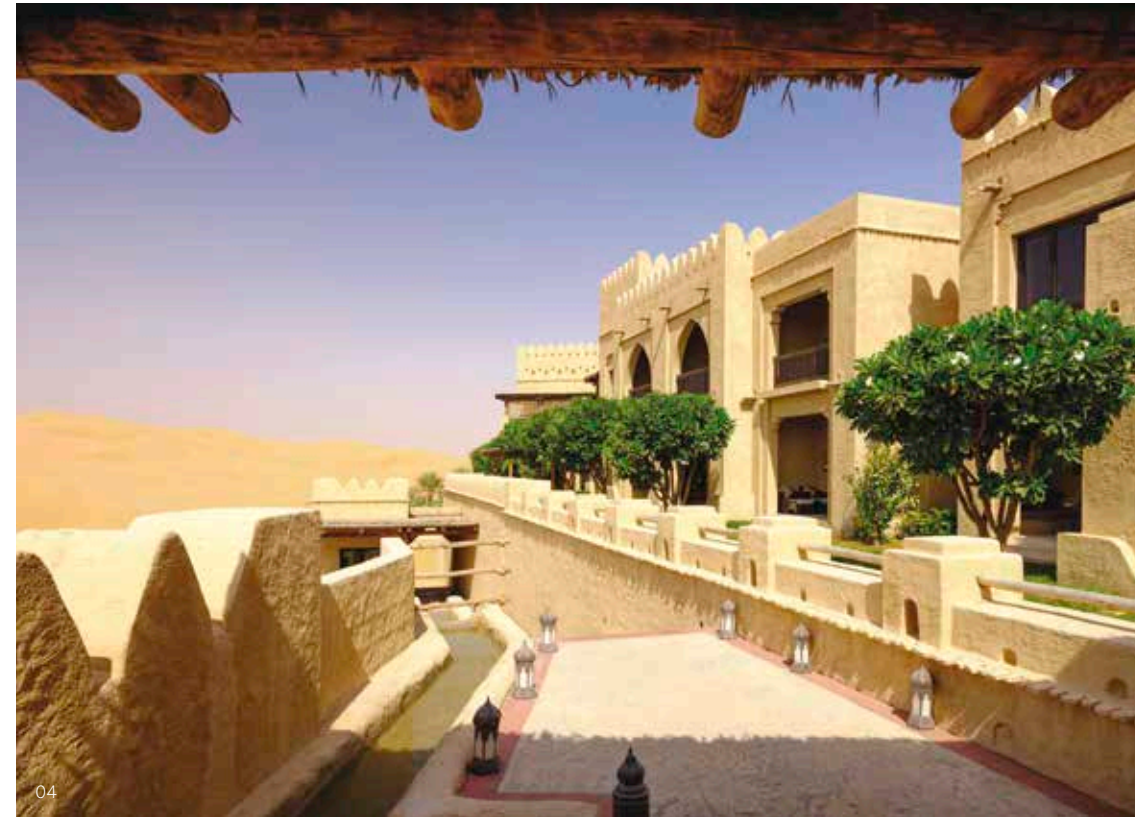
On our last evening in the desert, we climb a large dune to take in an Arabian sunset. They say that travellers to Antarctica become obsessed with ice formations. Well, in the desert of Abu

Dhabi, it is the ever-changing moods of the dunes that capture the imagination. The descending sun becomes filtered through sand haze rich in iron, causing it to glow red. The dunes look like pink whipped meringue before the sun disappears, turning them dark crimson. They are utterly mesmerising and a romantic setting for our Arabian barbecue with Bedouin-style tents.

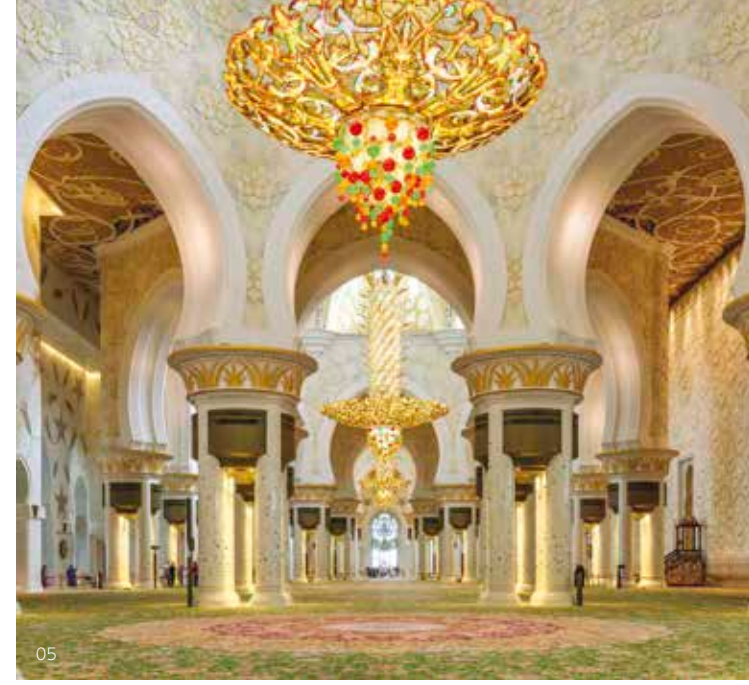
**Unrestrained imagination**

Abu Dhabi city is a different speed and mid-way through development that will make it one of the world's greatest tourism hubs within two decades: the world's biggest and best airport and cruise ship port, serviced by unending hotels, shopping and stunning beaches. This is an energy-fuelled, visionary boom.

The latest marvel is the billion-dollar Louvre Abu Dhabi, opened in November. The museum resembles a floating dome, with a pattern designed to resemble rays of sun passing through a date palm.



04



05



06

01 Qasr Al Sarab Desert Resort emerges like a mythical Arabian Palace 02 Falcon in training 03 Abu Dhabi skyline 04 Traditional style at Qasr Al Sarab 05 & 06 The spectacular Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque. All images © Dan Avila

*“The dunes look like pink whipped meringue before the sun disappears, turning them dark crimson.”*



02



03

As impressive as examples of prosperity are, the cultural phenomenon of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque left me blown away. Commissioned by its namesake and built with no concern for cost, the courtyard is an enormous mosaic of tile with gold and mother-of-pearl adorning the structure.

Our final taste of Abu Dhabi was the The St. Regis Hotel's Brunch in the Clouds. In the world's highest suspended suite, connecting towers on the 48th and 49th floor, the brunch happens monthly. As luck would have it, ours was a special Cristal occasion. Champagne flowed with the tops ceremoniously sabred, complementing the caviar and French black truffles being shaved on dishes at the table.

Abu Dhabi is a place on the move, and in a hurry. With a potent combination of unrestrained imagination, almost unlimited capacity, and immense pride in its culture and people, Abu Dhabi is and will remain a must-visit location for discerning travellers. ♦

**Travel file**

**Information**  
October to April are Abu Dhabi winter months and the best time to visit. Days are warm and nights mild. Summer temperatures exceed 50 degrees Celsius with high humidity. [visitabudhabi.ae](http://visitabudhabi.ae)

**Accommodation**  
[qasralsarab.anantara.com](http://qasralsarab.anantara.com)  
[stregisabudhabi.com](http://stregisabudhabi.com)

**Getting there**  
Abu Dhabi is the Etihad hub with regular flights direct from most Australian cities. [etihad.com](http://etihad.com)